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ABSTRACT

A sabbatical spent exploring the genre of travel writing began a writing instructor's journey to figure out what travel writing teaches--and how--and why it is so compelling to students. Her research in the genre of travel writing began as she was preparing students going abroad to keep meaningful journals. In middle- and advanced-level travel writing courses, students, too, are fascinated by travel writing and pursue a variety of writing projects. Travel writing's flexibility accommodates varied content. Teaching a range of students with different backgrounds and experiences invites an equally diverse array of materials--revisiting previous journeys through photographs, making oral presentations, etc. Much of the practice in shaping writing to experiment with topics, styles, and ways of thinking comes in the form of journal entries. Yet what remains so compelling is probably the concept of the journey as metaphor--the class, the teaching, the research, the discovery within the writing are all perceived as journey. Travel writing offers a way out of the dilemmas of expressive writing, which can disintegrate into whining and narcissism, because it both enlarges the canvas and deepens the perspective. Teachers of such a travel writing course model the receptive character of the traveller willing to be touched by people and places. Teachers can set some guidelines, but they must not define the journey in advance. Perhaps teachers model this best when they share their own writing, showing that they too can be touched or overwhelmed by discovery of people and places. (RS)

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Twila Yates Papay

Stunned to Silence:
Teaching Travel Writing as Metaphor and Meaning in Life

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> Of stones and savage places. In the Coleridge sense, enchanted. In seeking out wildness, open space, privacy of time and place in nature, we seek our deeper selves, our unadorned persons. We wish to understand relationships, to know ourselves as people. In sociologist Eamon Slater's terms, we seek past time, a solution to our post-modern dilemma. Perhaps it is reassuring to find the neolithic peoples, so alien to us, engaged in the same deep searching, creating their patterns, making meaning in the face of the inscrutable.
>
> Whatever those alignments represent, their presence through time is a charmed miracle, a reminder of spirit and a will to beauty. But perhaps I love them best as an expression of the love of wildness, the recognition of the power of nature-hewn stone to voice the silent passions of our lives.

This reflection on Brittany's Alignments of Carnac illustrates what happened to me during my sabbatical explorations of travel writing. Of course, my research revealed the sheer size and diversity of the genre. But I also became the traveller with a quest, seeking the self in the context of the other. I set out as a teacher, studying the genre primarily to teach it. Even my logic was simple: our students go off on elaborate journeys unprepared, often returning with little more than a suitcase of souvenirs and some pictures they cannot identify. I wanted travel to touch their lives; and I knew writing to be the vehicle of transformation.

What I did not expect was to be myself enthralled. How could I know that my sabbatical metaphorphosis would entail an encounter with the ancient stones, my sense of connection to the Neolithic peoples, enhancing through them my contact with the earth, the revelation of the species self? Like so many journeys, mine began in text and conversation, talking with colleagues in Dublin, examining theories of passage graves, discovering a symbology emphasizing union with earth, sky, and community. By the time I reached

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the glorious passage graves of Newgrange, I was possessed. The language of my journal veered through narrative expressive analysis and transactional feminist contemplation to philosophical speculation to an eventual halting attempt at the poetic:

> I touch the stone, I follow the majestic passageway, I hear the wind and feel the rain and contemplate a slanting ray of sunshine. Most of all, I conclude these mysteries must surely be a form of celebration. As is all beauty, all art, all giving voice to the spirit each must follow. A passage through stone is a doorway, a metaphor, a way of seeing the universe, a way of reaching inside. . .and beyond. . .the self.

And so I pursued the ancient stones: across Ireland and Scotland, through the amazing Alignments of Carnac, until at last I stumbled upon the people who introduced this ancient temple structure to Europe, leaving those most ancient of temples in Malta nearly 7000 years ago to honor a great "Mother Goddess." My journal recalls it all! After a complex analysis of the Tarxien Temples drawn from various readings, the Valletta Museum of Archaeology, and our own visit, I concluded:

> Yet this isn't what I thought when I saw them. No, strolling through the light drizzle, I would murmur to Joe, "Look at that!" Or, "Ah, have you seen this?" The temples were an amazement beyond my powers of coherence. Like the passage graves, like the alignments, like the stone circles, they reach up out of an alien past to speak mutely of another frame of reference, another way of seeing, another kind of knowing. Of all the works these people could have attempted, they chose the temples. To find the megaliths, to smooth the stones, to move and shape and lift and design and arrange them. Without so much as a wheel. And why? Well, because of their connection to the earth, perceived by them as the great Mother, she whom they somehow connected with in their creations of massive loveliness. The temples they filled with their most elegant art objects. Yet it is the temples themselves which grip my heart and soul. And so we wandered twice through the lovely maze of smooth standing and twisted fallen rock, stunned to silence by the elegant cut of stone.

To my growing obsession with ancient peoples and their stones I credit a new finding of myself, connections to a wider knowing, a contextualization that helped me become the teacher I had often tried to be--learner among learners, she who journeys with questions unanswered and accepts the small obscurities to which our hopes are sometimes consigned.

But here's the problem. I began this investigation for my students. And though I became. . .and remain. . .intrigued, I am first of all--a teacher. To my great joy, my students too are fascinated by travel writing, while the genre offers much that I wish to teach. So this paper is itself a sort of journey, my effort to figure out what travel writing teaches--and how--and <u>why</u> it is so compelling to my students.

The students themselves are sufficiently intriguing in their own purposes. My research began as I was preparing students going abroad to keep meaningful journals. Then there have been Independent Studies, like that of Rob, who built a two-week winter climb of Mount Rainier with a professional expedition into a writing project. "What I'm afraid of," he wrote me the day before he left, "isn't the physical stuff. But I think of the writing you've shown me where the personal is integrated with a wider comprehension of the place. I'm afraid I can't learn to do that, and that's what travelling and writing together are all about."

In a more typical middle level travel writing class are students like Angus, who sought to comprehend his trip to Alaska working on salmon boats, which made him an independent thinker. Or

Cary, who used the class to prepare for a term's study at Oxford, fearful that going without the proper understanding of place and expectations would render her time there as empty as her memories of a high school visit to France.

At the advanced level, in a course entitled "The Traveller's Mind," I met Lee, who had lost her family and wanted to explore in writing the persistent tug of Colorado, a place she frequently visited but feared actually moving to. (After her term project, she bought her mountain cottage.) There too was Abdul, writing the conflict between his childhood in Casablanca and the southern Morocco of his grandparents, a place of happy dreams but fearful realities where his own children might readily become sexist, racist, religious bigots. Then there was Todd, exploring the wasted opportunities of army years in Germany, contrasting the traveller he'd now like to be with his youthful tendency to follow his buddies and behave like an American tourist.

Yet travel writing is compelling to less deliberate students too, its flexibility accomodating varied content. For a freshman seminar class I fashioned "Fabulous Journeys: Connecting with the Earth and Each Other." Also an orientation to college life and to Central Florida, it envisioned students as travellers in the alien culture of Rollins. Thus, we journeyed to such exotic sites as the Writing Center, library, Art Museum, President's office, a campus lecture, a play, before taking on the wider culture of the area, Big Tree Park, Birds of Prey Sanctuary, the Zora Neal Hurston Museum. Collaborative groups visited and made oral presentations

on other sites. Of course, we learned to live within the culture, and my two peer mentors introduced students to local cultural problems: the social scene, substance abuse, gender problems, negotiating the shoals of going home and coming back. Papers ranged from Emily's discovering her spiritual side in Ireland and Alan's identifying his failures as a bored adolescent traveller in need of the "commandments of travel" his experiences evoked, to Melissa's seeing her lifelong journey through music as a means of building connections to the outside world. Justin wrote compellingly of the Great Smokey Mountains, illustrating nature entwined with the growth of the human spirit.

Teaching this melange of students invites an equally diverse array of materials. Photographs and conversations on previous journeys are good starters, drawing everyone into questions the course is intended to pose. Readings seem to go out of print as soon as ordered, but a quick stroll through the travel section of any major bookstore offers replacements. Short trips on and off campus provide collaborative experiences, though most students bring their own materials in their heads. What is essential to teaching the genre is eloquently stated in a writing prompt I give my students early on, a quotation from Proust: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." Prompts written at the beginnings of class periods enable us to redefine travel, coming to an understanding that most travel writing is focussed on either people or places. (A favorite prompt for this topic begins, "What surprised me most about the people of

_____ was . . . ."). The definition of a good traveller takes much longer, and occupies bits of conversation throughout the course. ("To be a real traveller requires that I . . ." is a good opening prompt.) But as students come to see that travel is as much a state of mind as a matter of location, they evolve as observers, analyzers, and critical thinkers, all of which is evinced in the final projects they produce.

Much of the practice in shaping writing to experiment with topics, styles, and ways of thinking comes in the form of journal entries. In addition to Journal Journeys and Imaginary Journeys, where students simply record stories or play with fantasies, I assign Ethical Reflections for writers to raise questions and assess their own values in relation to other cultures. Decisions Revisited are opportunities to reconsider how a travel experience might have been salvaged with better understanding. For advanced classes I've created some new options: Character Commentaries; Quests and Explorations; Dialogues, Descriptions, Recreations; Reader Responses. All of this practice with alternative contexts leads to richer, more complex texts.

Yet the intriguing question remains: what is so compelling, so encompassing? Probably the concept of the journey as metaphor. (I speak of the metaphor as in Lakoff and Johnson's Metaphors We Live By; in this case the journey serves as organizing principle.) The class, the teaching, the research, the discovery within the writing: all are perceived as journey. Here in a single course, then, lies the human condition, a connection to the whole person.

Travel, after all, is what we do--as people and through time. Somehow the travel writing we produce captures our placement within the larger context of the human situation, as when I placed myself in relation to the neolithic rocks, or in the following passage where I try to capture the very human sense of wonder in contrast to the vast wild panorama of Iguassu Falls:

> And there we stood, spray-drenched, in the midst of the mist, a thousand thousand droplets rising upward out of the drowning roar before and to our sides and dropping off below into fogmist. And we stood in the mist of the Great Waters, skin-soaked, shirts clinging, globules and beads of the Iguazu River shivering like snowflakes in our tresses, then trickling down our giggling, laugh-stained faces. For we had climbed the Brazilian panorama of the Iguacu Falls (all 275 of them), then crossed back for the drenching baptismal Iguazu close-up reached across a nearly mile-long wooden bridge in Argentina.

If what holds the course curriculum together, then, isn't the artificial boundaries of an assignment, but rather the excitement of travel as human condition, the repeated discovery of interconnectedness, we must think of writing in a new way. The categories we've created are simply too circumscribed. Oh, travel writing surely incorporates and demands the same concepts, but they emerge almost incidentally. Alan's Travel Commandments project is a clear example, a transactional document for an audience of student travellers. Yet it arose from his own expressive reflections upon himself as traveller, his reading and research evolving naturally as an integral part of the project. And listen to Justin's poetic description of dawn in the Great Smokies, just before his encounter with a bear:

> Clear and cool. A layer of rippling mist blanketed the ground, soon to be burned off by the rising sun. The sound of a nearby creek echoed like laughter through the great stand of

> hemlock trees. Barely lighting the treetops, the sun slid upwards, the forest itself still painted the pitch of last night. Slowly blackness was permeated as sunlight sifted through the trees. Mist floating above the ground parted as I walked through it, and a wake of swirling moisture followed me, the mist dancing and flowing in spots like a rolling river. Almost creation day.

Similarly, Lee's project on Colorado elicited argumentative and descriptive, research and reflective writing, while Cary's report-writing on Oxford was dappled with poetic expectations and frank analyses of values and choices. Thus each document of travel writing offers its own universe of problems to solve and strategies to embrace.

For me perhaps the happiest resolution it offers is a way out of the dilemmas of expressive writing. Long a proponent of expressive and personal writing, I am well versed in the human and intellectual growth such writing inevitably spawns. Yet I struggle with the "Me-focus," which I know can disintegrate into mere whining and narcissism. The travel mode is a way out of this, because it both enlarges the canvass and deepens the perspective.

In short, travel writing demands that we contextualize. Students seem to enjoy and move readily between the internal and the external in travel writing, fitting themselves naturally into the world they are exploring, yet allowing themselves to be touched by it. Thus, however expressive the writing, it still forces a global context. To be a traveller, one must add Emerson's Not-Me to the Me. Values are compared as well as examined. In exploring and explicating the emerging text in a peer group, critical thinking skills deepen and expand.

This same advantage emerges in discussions of the traveller as well. In some lights, after all, travel may seem quite selfish, imperialist even. Certainly it may damage the environment. Visitors have been known to steal local treasures, denigrate whole populations, or at least display an intolerable level of condescension toward local people. We have all encountered visitors more interested in snapping photos and criticizing the toilet paper than coming to understand the culture. As the whole problem of traveller v. tourist emerges, the writer cannot ignore the underlying question of values in a more global context. Figuring out who we are and who we want to be, what values are reasonable in a needy world, leads to worthy arguments. Making sense of what's out there is how students contextualize the Me in relation to the Not-Me.

The beauty of travel lies in the fact that when we do it right, it has to affect us. And in the traveller's writing those effects emerge. So it becomes very hard just to stick with old tired beliefs--one's own or those of one's parents. Even the pleasures we cherish most in our travels come to be questioned and cross-questioned, as in this reflection:

> Another title for this entry might be "Life Before Humans," reflecting my amusement at my frequent disdain for all things human, my preferring the pristine beauty of the countryside we travel through (albeit on a road made by and for people in a vehicle designed and fueled only because we live in a technological society). Yet how often I consider how a given land must have looked to its first visitors, or how explorers must have felt in encountering, say, that magnificent Sydney Harbour or the Falls of Iguassu. Or that first long sailing along Long Island. How the land must have looked before we did that which we have done upon it!
>
> And yet, even were it possible for my comfort to remain and I to find a world of "life before humans," I would not choose such a place. This would be inconsistent with my great

> joy in the works of humans that stun and touch and lift me out of myself and bring me to a serenity beyond the me. Like the alignments of Carnac. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. And now as well the Temple of Borobudur.

This habit of questioning becomes infectious, as in this very paper, which feels like a series of questions. Here's another: if I have become traveller and writer as well as teacher, then what is my role in the classroom? Not the tape-recorder tour guide who has all the information in advance and spits it out in sequence no matter what the tourists are doing on the bus. Not the tour escort getting passengers to hotels, nor even the tour guide who points out sights and answers questions. Oh, I'm the agent who planned the trip and wrote up the syllabus, but it had better be more than a triptik! And as teacher I'd better go along as simply a more experienced traveller, one still willing to be changed. Since I've travelled, I have to model the receptive character of the traveller willing to be touched by people and place, willing to laugh at herself. So we're in this thing learning--together. I have to be open to students having seen things differently. As a teacher I can set some guidelines, but I must not define the journey in advance.

Perhaps I model this best when I share my own writing, show that I too can be touched or overwhelmed. Near Yogyakarta (Java) I climbed the magnificent 1200-year-old Buddhist temple, Borobudur, struggling with a knee disability to mount 150 rough stone steps, many higher than my knees, rounding tiers to follow 1500 relief sculptures of the life of Sidhartha, but headed for 72 latticed stupas and the enormous stupa on the very top. Then I wrote:

> I only know I loved this beautiful temple, felt a harmony with the gracious scenery of its setting, rejoiced in my heart that I had managed to climb it, to touch the latticed stupas of the Buddha, to feel the great serenity of this place.
>
> And then the painful descent. But I didn't mind; I only thought of how much joy I felt, that I am so rich as to come to Borobudur still able to climb, to descend with Joe's gracious help, his tender presence a reassurance in much that is alien. Serenity. I felt it there today.

Part of the wholeness that travel brings is that I usually feel that serenity in the classroom as well. But here's another question: can you teach this if you're not a traveller/writer yourself? Odd question to pose to an audience of English teachers, travellers all, who know the vicarious journeys of their books. Odd question, too, when the journeys lie all around us, and Thoreau assured us quite seriously that he had "travelled widely in Concord." Here's a more serious question: can a teacher not be a traveller? Aren't the best classes always journeys? Can we not incorporate the metaphors and materials of travel writing into many of our classes? Recognizing any writing, any literature course I teach as a journey of intellect and spirit, through uncharted space with a group of fellow travellers whose special talents will only emerge at need, I can see that what so intrigues my students is the blank slate, the sense of potential, the eager anticipation of something wholly unexpected, yet somehow strangely familiar. They are looking for connection in a world that worries them. So am I.

And the final question: have I found what I went looking for, for my students, for myself? For both, I suspect, the secret lies in that Proust passage, seeing with new eyes, documenting, thinking

in new ways, accepting while challenging. Did I find it? You be the judge. This passage is entitled "Sweet Enchantment."

> Last night I saw three moons of Jupiter, floating clearly, pale luminous reflecting spheres of mystery all in a row off to the right of the shining planet. The fourth was still a ghost, invisible. At my request our ship's astronomer turned his powerful binoculars toward the brilliance of Alpha Centauri, up to Beta, then off to the left, to the second visible patch of light, focusing upon Omega Centauri, the first globular cluster I've ever seen, gorgeous, a luminous fuzzy pin-dotted glow of 100,000 stars rotating around a common core, all in turn a rotating part of our Milky Way. Long and longingly I gazed into the white radiant brilliance of the Milky Way, tracing the Southern Cross and Carina the Ship, past Canopus and Sirius, all the way to Orion and Aldebaron, and down where the Pleides had already sunk for the night. And then I had another look at the moons of Jupiter, three shining orbs I'd never dreamed to see. And if this is not exploration, yet surely it is enchantment, to see and comprehend, to hold in one's hand, as it were, a bit of the eloquence that binds this universe in which we sail so many separate journeys in search of our private stars.

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